

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 17

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of September 27, 1948

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK SUN NEW YORK STAR NEW YORK POST

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"Town House"

Journal  American

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

A Simplex Play In a Duplex Set

By ROBERT GARLAND

Last night at the National, where "Town House" came to brighten the new season, it was as if Donald Oenslager had designed a three-room set and Gertrude Tonkonogy had furnished a one-act play to fit it. Then, finding the container bigger than its contents, odd wads of allegory were used as filling.

If this is not the way it was, it is the way it seemed to be. Designed by Mr. Oenslager, with the assistance of Frederick Stever, built by the T. B. McDonald Construction Company, with the assistance of Triangle Studios, the duplex set over-wrapped the simplex play provided by Miss Tonkonogy as filler.

Where somebody could not see the woods for the trees, the premiere congregation could not see the play for the scenery. Or, if this is exaggeration, they were distracted by it. I was so fascinated by the upstairs, the downstairs and the ladies' chambers,

that I often missed what the inhabitants were saying.

And, from what I did hear, I can tell you that they were saying such sometimes wise and oftentimes witty things as Gertrude Tonkonogy made her players—Cecilia Loftus and Ruth Gordon; Brian Donlevy and Richard Whorf—say in "Three Corners Moon."

Witty Way

After a decade and a half, Miss Tonkonogy retains a wise and witty way with words. In "Town House"—based on stories by John Cheever—the playwright continues to write like a Mad Hatter turned dramatist. But, on 41st st., Donald Oenslager's scenic interruptions are there to cramp her style.

Even if they do, you are well aware that the city mansion of the title has been taken over by three youthful couples. Co-operatively, to use the vulgar word! The Tremaines, Lucille and Jack.

The Murrays, Esther and Pete. The Hyiers, Carol and Larry. These settle down to live like one big happy family.

A United Nations—this is the allegory!—in miniature, they get together, they get apart, they get together and begin all over again in a Lake-Successful manner. Often, it is fun to watch them. Often, it is not. For there are scenes and situations that do not hit their mark. Too often toward the last.

I would not say that the contents supplied by Miss Tonkonogy for Mr. Oenslager's container are always as filling as they should be. But when they are good, they are good. And when they are not good, you turn to the scenic reservoir.

Fine Comedians

With pleasure I report that "Town House" brings two fine young comedians back to Broadway. And one fine older one. The older one is Margaret Dale, pretending to be a Baltimorean. I write "pretending" because her Mrs. Osgood is obviously a phoney. No true Baltimorean would go to the Belvedere for oysters!

The two young comedians are Mary Wickes, who deals with Esther Murray, and Hiram Sherman, who deals with her husband, Pete. Upstairs, downstairs, and on the stairway in between, they are the apples of the evening's eye. And they deserve a better daughter than the Ramona sup-

TOWN HOUSE

TOWN HOUSE, a comedy by Gertrude Tonkonogy, based on the New Yorker stories by John Cheever. Staged by George S. Kaufman; scenery and lighting by Donald Oenslager; costumes supervised by John Curry; produced by Max Gordon. At the National Theatre.

Lucille Tremaine	June Duprez
Jack Tremaine	James Monks
Pete Murray	Hiram Sherman
Esther Murray	Mary Wickes
Samson Murray	Roberta Field
Carol Hyier	Peggy French
Larry Hyier	Ben Brown Jr.
Mrs. Osgood	Margaret Dale
Katherine Levy	Missbeth Dewing
Tom Barker	Henry Jones
Putnam Phelps	Edwin Jerome
A Man	Kirk Ryder
A Woman	Vera Fuller Malish

SYNOPSIS: Act I—A spring evening. Act II, Scene 1—A few weeks later. Scene 2—Several days later. Act III—Again a few days later.

plied by wee Roberta Field.

The others are—the others! But I would like to know by what Who's Who mumbo-jumbo an actress as unknown as June Duprez, playing Lucille Tremaine with ineptitude, gets better fitting in the programs than an actress as known as Margaret Dale? Or as Mary Wickes? Or an actor as known as Hiram Sherman?

The direction of Gertrude Tonkonogy's simplex "Town House" in Donald Oenslager's duplex set was no easy job for George S. Kaufman. But, had I been he, I would have vented my directorial disapproval on the scenery. There, Donald, Oenslager is grandly guilty of over-playing!

DAILY NEWS

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

'Town House' Slices Life Too Thin; Good Lines, Good Cast, Fair Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The slice-of-life formula is one of the oldest techniques in any form of fiction, from the novel to the movie. When life is sliced extra-thin, it makes a nice, astringent little short story for a nice, astringent magazine like The New Yorker.

Usually, when an author has written enough little pieces for a magazine, some publisher brings them out for him in book form, illustrated by Soglow, Steig or Arno. In the case of John Cheever's storylets in The New Yorker, Gertrude Tonkonogy made them into a play and the play was given a very fine production by Max Gordon at the National Theatre last evening, under the title of "Town House."

"Town House" remains a pleasant collection of slices-of-life, with

plenty of witty and wacky lines, and it has the greatest possible benefit from a skillful cast which has been directed by George S. Kaufman in one of Mr. Kaufman's best moods. But it does not make a play. Much as I enjoyed brief scenes, deft performances and clever bits of business, I never found myself caring whether the action went on.

Living Together.

"Town House" concerns a group of people in varying stages of impoverishment and intelligence who

have, cooperatively, set up house-keeping in what used to be somebody's mansion. There are snobs and lowbrows and intellectuals and plain practical people, and there is a precocious child. They are so different from one another that they tend to fly apart, and their cooperative rooming-house seems doomed. But, under the influence of the town house, they begin to get together; each begins to understand the peculiarities of the other, and by the end of the evening a balanced society is being formed.

This sounds good and workable—but the trouble is that Miss Tonkonogy didn't make me particularly want a balanced society to be formed. I liked all the snobs, lowbrows, intellectuals and prac-

tical people very much indeed—individually; but I didn't care whether they went on living in Town House or not.

Two-Level Stage.

Donald Oenslager's setting for the comedy is on two levels—a library on the ground floor and two bedrooms upstairs. If you sit in Row A I advise you to take an osteopath as your companion, to fix up your neck during intermissions. The two-story, three-room layout gives director Kaufman a fine opportunity to demonstrate his genius for timing and business, and when action is going on in all three places the technical success is immense.

I wish I had cared more about what went on, for the players are a typical Max Gordon-George Kaufman cast—which means they are very good. Hiram Sherman as a mild little scientist, Mary Wickes as an unkempt but overintelligent wife, James Monks and June Duprez as a pair of likable snobs and Roberta Field as an underprivileged child with a high IQ all are amusing.

They all get off lines which are either tart or brittle. "Town House" abounds in wisecracks and wise remarks. I wish I had had more concern about how it came out.

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Needs Repairing

JOHN CHEEVER'S "New Yorker" stories about couples doubling up in the housing shortage are the substance of an amiable and attenuated comedy in "Town House." Gertrude Tonkonogy's dramatization at the National has ripples of amusement as the experiment in co-operative living goes sour and is saved by a trick ending. It has been stylishly staged by George S. Kaufman with the aid of a two-level Donald Oenslager setting. And it has several agreeably antic performances to give the impression that the play is moving from one point to an-

other. Actually the work is merely a series of variations on a tiny theme. So little honest dramatic development is there that scenes could have been transposed without seriously marring the entertainment.

Miss Tonkonogy and Kaufman have employed a caricaturist's brush on the proceedings. The three couples who find themselves sharing a handsome house on the upper East Side might well have been copied from "New Yorker" drawings. There are a snobbish and improvident pair from Baltimore, a magazine editor and his too competent wife and a Mr. and Mrs. Malaprop with their progressive school daughter. With a living room and two upstairs bedrooms to wander through, they take on burlesque dimensions and engage in considerable feuding. The author has tried diligently to demonstrate that the bickering re-

sults in a beautiful understanding, but the happy climax is likely to leave one highly skeptical and a bit enervated.

The players whom Max Gordon has assembled for his production bear down hard on their assignments. June Duprez, who has learned a lot about acting since her last appearance here, is attractive as the spoiled matron who complains that she has never learned how to do anything and that no one will tell her how. James Monks, in the part of her clothes-horse husband goes overboard in proving his intolerance and incompetence. Reed Brown Jr. and Peggy French have the most human roles, but they make little of them. Most of the merriment in "Town House" is contributed by Mark Wickes and Hiram Sherman, who are funny without being too ridiculous, and little Roberta Field, whose portrayal

should give pause to radical educators.

Having so little material with which to work, Kaufman has taken full advantage of the two levels and three interiors on the National stage. He jumps from one set to another to parallel intra-marital and inter-marital squabbles, and on some sort of quantitative theory looses a general pandemonium in one scene when all three settings are buzzing at once. The dialogue is sometimes crackling. There are six bits of business to unfold the mounting nervous tension as the couples find living together too much for them. Unfortunately there is not enough amusement to carry through three acts. Incidentally, Margaret Dale has a fine bit. Part of her success comes from the fact that the residents of "Town House" get on a spectator's nerves as well as their own.

New York Post

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

The Fine Kaufman Touch A Boon to 'Town House'

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

They gave the theatre back to the professionals last night. Gertrude Tonkonogy's comedy, "Town House," which Max Gordon offered at the National, is no wonderwork of dramatic imagination, and I would hate to think that the stage isn't going to do considerably better this season. It has, however, the immense virtue of the shrewd, knowing touch of some people who really understand their business, and after so much well-intentioned amateurishness and bumbling inefficiency, it is a pleasure to see a play that achieves its effects with the guile and competence of the expert.

Not to go beating about any bushes, it is the hand of George S. Kaufman that gives "Town

House" its sound comic dexterity. Taking a script that even now seems slender, brittle and mechanical, he has given it the rich advantage of a brisk pace, a clockwork precision, an inventive talent for humorous stage business and an ability to get the best out of the actors involved. Immeasurably aided by Donald Oenslager's elaborate, ingenious and typically handsome duplex setting, the Kaufman gift for shrewdly humorous manipulation has provided a reasonably routine play with life-saving vigor and vitality.

Three Families

Miss Tonkonogy's comedy is based on a series of stories by John Cheever, which appeared in the New Yorker and which almost everybody but this reviewer seems to have read. It deals with three families of violently contrasting manners and conditions, who try community living in a once-fashionable Fifth Avenue town house, apparently make a great mess of it, and, just when the whole experiment appears to be a colossal failure, find that they can't get along without one another. For me one

handicap lay in the fact that I can't imagine anyone getting along with any of the families.

There is some moral in all this about the ability of people, or perhaps nations, to live together in peace and mutual tolerance, learning and growing in character through an understanding of each other's faults and virtues, but wisely there is no emphasis on any such thing. What concerns the play is the comic aspects of the situation, and it certainly cannot be said that they are steadily or overwhelmingly hilarious, or even warmly human.

Nor is there any remarkably witty or extraordinarily humorous dialogue to brighten the evening. Both the pattern of the play and its characters are too obvious and mechanical for complete satisfaction.

The Blessings

If the weaknesses of "Town House" are pretty discernible, so are the virtues. High among the blessings are several of the performances. Mary Wickes, for one, is a comedienne of striking proficiency, and she is at her expert best as a gawky and pain-

fully serious wife. The always engaging Hiram Sherman is in fine form as her unworshipful and academic husband, and their horrible child is played with wonderfully scendish humor by little Roberta Field. June Duprez, whose adventures with the luckless Civic Repertory Theatre were unhappy, is particularly good as an incompetent and beautiful society-girl wife.

Under Mr. Kaufman's wise guidance, these and the other players take hold of roles that tend toward the mechanical and add handsomely to the gayety of the proceedings. In addition, "Town House" would be worth the attention of those who admire the sure professional touch in the theatre if only for the manner in which the action, which often takes place on two levels and in three separate scenes at the same time, flows with unflinching smoothness. Miss Tonkonogy's play cannot be cheered for any display of superior comic writing but its production makes it the first commendable entertainment of the season.

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

Gertrude Tonkonogy's 'Town House' Is Based on John Cheever's Short Stories in The New Yorker

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although Gertrude Tonkonogy's "Town House" is too small for the characters of her play, it is too large for comedy. As produced at the National last evening, it is a thin, loose, mechanical whizzbang

that never explodes across the footlights. To most of us, gloomy and beaten after three weeks of dismal theatregoing, this comes as a horrible surprise. For there is a law which provides that all comedies fashioned out of New Yorker fiction have to be a success on the lo-

cal stage. Heretofore this law has been broken only once.

"Town House" comes from some humorous stories John Cheever wrote for The New Yorker. Miss Tonkonogy is the author of a long-cherished comedy, "Three-Cornered Moon," produced in 1933. "Town House" has been directed by George S. Kaufman, the old master of slapstick and sleight-of-hand; and has been produced by Max Gordon, who never touches anything worth less than a million dollars or vital to the international situation. If this combination cannot latch onto a laugh in the course of the evening, we must be moving into a new era.

"Town House" is the story of three couples, normally indigent, who take over a gentleman's mansion on a cooperative basis. Before the first act is over it is obvious that they are going to be just one big unhappy family; and before the second act is over, their town house has gone up in a tornado of temperment.

In Mr. Cheever's suavely malicious prose, this communal disaster seemed plausible and amusing. But it is as detached as figures on a wall-screen in the play. For the characters are superficially described; they never emerge as human beings with lives of their own. And the huge

"Town House"—continued

size of the production, with a large living room downstairs and two smaller rooms upstairs, keeps the characters widely separated. Although they inhabit the house, they do not inhabit the play.

Returning reinvigorated from a wholesome vacation, Donald Oenslager has designed a capacious town house cold and massive enough for people of high breeding. Under Mr. Kaufman's metro-

monic direction, the actors spend most of the evening moving upstairs or down, slamming doors or shouting to each other across the vast spaces of the living-room.

Among the actors are Hiram Sherman, with his pouting, innocent humor, which is one of the treasures of the Gotham stage; and gawky Mary Wickes, who knows how to lean on a line and make it snicker. Cast as the roughest-mannered couple, they

play the only parts that have warmth and humanity; and they play them wonderfully well.

The other members of the cast are good, too—particularly June Duprez as a brainless social butterfly from Baltimore, which seems to be offered as a comic town; and Peggy French as the only homemaker in the assembly. Reed Brown Jr. plays an unrecognized magazine genius agreeably. Margaret Dale plays the Baltimore

dowager with a frostiness heretofore reserved for Boston by our cosmopolitan stage. All the characters have been dressed with proper splendor by John Derro. Everything looks good, and everything works. But despite the three couples and their neurotic crises, "Town House" remains unoccupied. Nothing happens that a theatre-goer can get interested in.

Daily Mirror

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

'Town House' Built Of Dull Material

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Though a host of "names" was involved in the building of "Town House," which Max Gordon opened at the National Theatre last evening, it proved to be a disappointingly dull and uncomfortable place in which to spend a couple of hours.

Gertrude Tonkonogy, who some seasons ago fashioned a wain little comedy called "Three-Cornered Moon," created the new arrival out of successful magazine stories by John Cheever. The usually adroit and effective George S. Kaufman attended to the direction. Donald Oenslager

provided one of the most spectacular sets to grace a legit stage in several years.

Town House is a New York mansion into which three designing young couples move on a cooperative basis, to promote their fortunes. Next door lives a crotchety and wealthy publisher

of slick magazines. One couple wants the rich neighbor to finance a sophisticated magazine, another wants to sell him bonds and the third wants him to save a progressive school from bankruptcy.

The interests and personalities of the trio conflict, and, apparently defeated, they decide to disband and return to their former homes. In them, in the last act, Miss Tonkonogy sees the peoples of the globe, and points the play's only message. If three intelligent young couples cannot live together in harmony in a single big house, what hope is there for the world?

She solves the difficulty in the last few minutes by having the publisher come to the rescue for selfish reasons, and by having the couples reconcile their differences and arrive at a mutual understanding.

The three couples are played to

the hilt, within the limitations of Miss Tonkonogy's script and Kaufman's staging, by Hiram Sherman and Mary Wickes, Peggy French and Reed Brown, Jr., June Duprez and James Monks. Other leads are in the capable hands of Roberta Field, Margaret Dale, Elizabeth Dewing, Henry Jones, and Edwin Jerome.

"Town House" has its moments, but they are too infrequent. Characters that were real and amusing in print become caricatures in performance. Situations and observations that were entertaining and witty seem forced and stilted on stage in the spotlight.

Our hopes were high for "Town House," because of the talents enlisted in its service. It loomed as the most promising of the new season's offerings. Which heightened our sense of frustration as we attempted to cope with what proved, for us, a brittle study of chi-chi cast, paradoxically, in lead.

The Sun

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Director's Holiday.

Expert showmanship asserted itself last night for the first time this season as the sorcery of George S. Kaufman turned a negligible comedy, "Town House," into a fairly

lively show. The New York theater, pushed around since Labor Day, suddenly went professional.

Kaufman has a fascinating setting to work in—the remarkable two-decker structure designed by Donald Oenslager—but not much of a play to work with. He hasn't a comedy with the situations of "The Doughgirls" or one with the sublime lunacy of the lovable and unmethodical Byamores of "You Can't Take It With You." But to Gertrude Tonkonogy's skimpy and scanty "Town House" he brings a mastery of stage mechanics, an exactness of timing, an uncanny manipulation of exits and entrances. I hesitate

to think what Miss Tonkonogy's harum-scarum romp would have been in less skillful hands.

"Town House," based on the

New York stories of John Cheever, is a comedy of the frenzy within the walls of a fine old New

York mansion as three young couples try the experiment of living in it on a co-operative basis. They squabble, they fight, they quit speaking to one another, they agree to break up—and they're all together again at the final curtain.

It is a comedy of clownishness and of gags and pat curtains; of exaggerated characters, and a great deal of movement—upstairs and down, into the bedrooms and out of them. The Oenslager setting, with the big living-room library on the lower level and the bedrooms above, is a sturdy one. The players race about without any seeming possibility of injury. Lights work on cue, doors open and close when they should open and close, and "Town House" reveals the Broadway theater operating smoothly and efficiently and rather entertainingly, thanks to the Kaufman magic.

The cast is excellent. Mary Wickes, wry, dry and angular, has a genuine talent for eccentric comedy; she does a great deal with every line written for her,

every bit of business given to her.

She is now playing the gawky wife of a naive scientist, a character made very comical by Hiram Sherman. James Monks and June Duprez appear as the snobbish couple of "Town House" and Miss Duprez, under the Kaufman tutelage, has improved vastly as an actress. Roberta Field is amusing as an overpowering brat, Reed Brown Jr. is brisk and capable as a struggling magazine editor and Peggy French is first-rate as his wife. . . . All of these are people living in that big house on the co-operative plan. And there is Margaret Dale, artful and airy and expert as always, and quite disdainful of such outrageous experimentation.

"Town House" is not the masterpiece we've been waiting for. It's actually a play in which there is no writing at all. But it's well played and it is staged to perfection. The new theatrical season has been a bleak one to date and "Town House" offers enough entertainment to be welcomed.



SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

'Town House' Opens Its Doors Creakily

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

That familiarity may breed galloping contempt is the theme of "Town House," in which three young married couples try to share an old New York mansion. The families come from different worlds and might be described by tenses.

Of the past are the Tremaines, brought up as rich elegants, helpless in practical things and absorbed by appearances. The modern Hylers are an enterprising young magazine editor and his wife, ambitious but worldly, flexible and virtual. Not yet rooted

and most out of place are the Murrays, who have neither had advantages nor previously missed them, and who seriously try to apply to their own living any new knowledge they can acquire.

The friction of life together ignites no particular humor in any of them, which is one of the play's failings. The comedy element is labored and obvious and never compensates for the constant wrangling on the stage.

The Blank Space.

With attention split three ways, the play has not one nucleus but

three, and eventually one feels that his attention is devoted to the blank space in the middle of a triangle.

A domineering stage set, two stories high, which supplies three separate centers for action often simultaneous, increases this diffusion. The great height of the downstairs living room so elevates the second floor bedrooms that much of the upper action is lost.

There is a great deal of familiar reality about "Town House." Inevitably one wife pre-empted the garden, one couple avoids any dirty work and a child keeps the peace disturbed. Where the play seems false is in the failure of any of these people to have more than superficial curiosity about the others, or to feel any warmth toward them until the establishment is about to break up.

The plot involves a rich man next door, prey for each of the families. Tremaine hopes to sell him bonds and does disastrously. Hyler wants his backing for the magazine. And Mrs. Murray hopes he will refinance her child's school. Hyler's problem is eventually solved through a contrived case of mistaken identity.

Excellent Cast.

After an act in which most of

the characters stop speaking to each other and write notes, they all presumably decide to start over again. It is a most unsavory notion.

The cast assembled for the play is excellent, and more personable than the fictional characters. Mary Wickes and Hiram Sherman project exactly the right dazed and stubborn simplicity for the unsophisticated Murrays, and Roberta Field is a dry little sage as their daughter who is being progressively educated.

Peggy French and Reed Brown Jr. are forthright in their pleasant impatience as the Hylers. If there is any such thing you might call this couple average successes.

James Monks gives an incisive picture of arrogance unable to flex, as Tremaine, and June Duprez, as his wife, plays with a knowing gift for satire in her best local performance to date.

In retrospect, "Town House" does not seem comedy material. In its present mood the story produces irritation rather than conflict, and the wit is splashed on the characters instead of exuding from them.

NEW YORK STAR

September 26, 1948

A Gagload on a Brittle Skeleton

By John Lardner

There is a certain kind of stuff written for magazines, and *The New Yorker* gets more than its share of it, about which readers sometimes say to themselves, with a small yip of pleased discovery, "Why, this might make a pretty good play!" When such readers happen to be playwrights—confirmed playwrights, I mean, who cannot break the habit—the next step is inevitable and often unfortunate. As, for example, *Town House*, a comedy by Gertrude Tonkonogy, based on some *New Yorker* pieces by John Cheever, which opened Thursday night at the National.

In the sentence "Why, this might make a pretty good play!" the accents should fall on the "might" and the "pretty." Mr. Cheever's stories were really slim sketches, speckled with nice little touches of character but not self-sustaining outside the form in which they were written. They dealt, you may or may not remember, with three fami-

lies who pooled their funds in the first year of the post-war housing shortage and leased a big old mansion in this town in which they struggled gamely to lead a communal life.

It seems to be the theory of the hardened playwrights who adapt this sort of thing for the stage that all you need to do with mild, intelligent writing like Mr. Cheever's is emphasize its dramatic points—"corn it up," as the saying goes—and you have a real play. It seldom occurs to them to leave it right where it was and not write a play about it. Or not write a play at all.

Well, Mr. Cheever's stuff does not stand coming up. Perhaps it was too thin to begin with, and a little too corny already, it in its own delicate way. At any rate, under

the load of gags which Miss Tonkonogy heaps on its brittle spine, under the impact of her blatant character-drawing methods, which are not unlike those of the author of *Abie's Irish Rose*, it wobbles and writhes all over the stage of the National. I should add that it wobbles at two levels, for the stage is fitted up to represent two floors of a house; a duplex torture chamber, you could call it, and very handsome, too. (Setting and lighting, Donald Oenslager.)

Town House has an asset which is ordinarily surefire, namely, direction by George S. Kaufman. I don't know that it an asset in this case. The punch lines come fast, clearly, and emphatically, a sign, it is said, of the Kaufman touch, but my own recipe for the lines in *Town House* would have been to put as much space between them as possible and then add muffling, as with oars in the night.

"I've been injected for small pox,

typhoid, typhus, tetanus, etc., etc.," declaims a small girl child in the play, "Why, I'm almost immortal."

That is *Town House's* standard of realism. For its standard of wit, I refer you to a terse dialogue between a matriarch from Baltimore and her daughter. The daughter reports that her husband has met a valuable business client on the bridge path in Central Park.

"It all happened when they bumped rear ends," says she, feeding out the gaggeroo.

"In your father's day," says the mother, biting it off, "men did their business face to face."

In Mr. Cheever's stories, the three families who boarded together were a bit too broadly typed, perhaps, but they were recognizable people. Miss Tonkonogy hams them up with the loosest kind of caricature. The simple-uncouth family is wildly simple-uncouth. The silly-snobish family is recklessly silly-snobish. And the medium family, so help me, is too medium to be true. Against considerable odds, some of the actors do pretty well, especially June Duprez, Hiram Sherman, Mary Wickes, Peggy French, and Reed Brown Jr. It's a painful and losing fight, though, in compensation for which Equity should pass out Purple Hearts all around.

"Grandma's Diary"

The Sun

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

The Worst Ever.

The play reviewer has a responsibility to his readers, who are supposedly guided by his suggestions as to the plays that should be seen and those that are not worth

bothering about. Today's recommendation is just this: If you're in the vicinity of Henry Miller's Theater keep on walking. "Grandma's Diary" is awful.



The play by Albert Wineman Barker is a piece sponsored by the American Theater Group and it has unaccountably found refuge in one of Broadway's most attractive playhouses. It is actually worse than anything that arrived during the war years, and I'm not forgetting the gimcrack called "The Odds on Mrs. Oakley."

"Grandma's Diary," for the record, is about a captain-professor who returns from Japan with an Army nurse, with whom he'd had a

Hawaiian holiday, and finds that his wife, a radio writer, has been friendly with a crooner. Complications. For the information of those reviewers who had the good sense to leave after last night's second act, let me say that husband and wife make it up.

There's an actor in the new play named Herbert Evers who has a profile and seems to know how to speak lines. His fellow players are dreadful. Gilbert

Miller was in New Haven last night and nobody better tell him of the goings-on in the house his father built. He'd probably make a fuss.

Well, here it is September 23 and the season, for this department, is still a complete blank. Perhaps there'll be better luck this evening at the National. Playgoers are a trusting folk and they never give up.

New York World-Telegram

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

'Grandma' Should Stay In Bed

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The theatrical season can do nothing but improve from now on. "Grandma's Diary," an unoriginal little exercise, kept most of last night's audience in its seats just for the sake of wondering how long such featherweight inanities could continue.

The play falls into a classification of serious comedy, which means it is neither one nor the other. It concerns the petty infidelities of a phony soap opera authoress and her husband who has been in the Army occupying Japan.

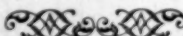
Nothing that goes on proves that she has the slightest affection for her ghost writer or her neighboring jingle tenor. Nor does it prove that her husband is anything like frantic over the nurse he brings home with him.

'GRANDMA'S DIARY.'

GRANDMA'S DIARY, a "satirical comedy" in three acts, by Albert Wineman Barker, produced by the American Theatre Group; played by the author, scenic and lighting by Raymond Sawyer; at Henry Miller's Theatre.

Harriett.....Augustus Smith
Pete.....Herbert Evers
Alice.....Robert Prince
Linda.....Gertrude Rozan
Carl.....George Neise
Burt.....Leonard Elliott
Gaines.....Robert A. Griffin

SYNOPSIS: Seventeen hours of acting in the greenhouse of Linda, Period in New York City. The time is now. Act I.—Late afternoon. Act II.—That night. Act III.—The next morning.



With Aimless Chatter.

Topping this paucity of relationship, is the fact that there is next to no evidence that the couple themselves are more than irritated with each other, despite the fact that they are eventually reunited.

This would-be libidinous shuffle goes on to the tune of aimless chatter which could only seem funny to a marijuana smoker.

References to Serial.

The title derives from vague references to the fact that the leading lady's radio serial was sold on the strength of her grandmother's diary as source material.

A fierce portrait of Grandma glowers over the actors with more disapproval than the audience had interest enough to show.

Daily Mirror

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

'Grandma's Diary' At Miller Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

An ambitious new organization calling itself The American Theatre Group made an inauspicious Broadway bow last evening at Henry Miller's Theatre in a feather-weight vehicle, "Grandma's Diary," by Albert Wineman Barker. We liked the acting company, but couldn't go for the script.

The farce has to do with a flighty wife, who uses her grandmother's diary as the basis for a radio soap opera, and her philandering husband, just out of uniform after service in the Pacific. During the war the wife had become more than a little fond of a crooner, and the husband had interested himself in a young Army nurse.

Radio scripter and ex-Army Captain found themselves in love

all over again, and, after a few silly complications, decided to make a go of it. At the curtain's fall, the nurse and the crooner also seemed candidates for a marriage license and a visit to the parson, with the blessing and connivance of a Brigadier General, who didn't have enough to do in Washington to keep him busy.

Barker's farce is reminiscent of "John Loves Mary," dealing as it does with the hectic love-life

of soldiers returning from war. But it merely makes you realize what a masterful comedy job its predecessor was.

Cast as the soap-opera queen is Gertrude Rozan, who came to the American theatre from Vienna via Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre. Miss Rozan is a svelte, attractive blonde. She reminds you more than a little of Elizabeth Bergner, though, thank goodness, she uses her hands and arms with a restraint that is Bergner has never mastered.

Herbert Evers, as the husband, is a first-rate juvenile, worth the attention of talent scouts and agents. Augustus Smith, in a minor role, gives a performance that would have met with the approval of that admirable Negro actor and my good friend, Oscar Polk, could he have been present last night.

Leonard Elliott, a fine comedian who has had difficulty in landing decent roles of late, struggles nobly through some of the worst humor ever to goody up a hapless funster in recent seasons. Eileen Prince, George Neise and Robert E. Griffin also merit citations for courage under fire.

A majority of the players in "Grandma's Diary" are graduates of little and community theatres and radio programs. They are good actors. They would be first rate in a first-rate script. They should make Broadway just a little ashamed of itself for having done so little to further the progress of the tributary theatre and other entertainment mediums which school its young players and directors.

Speaking of directors, author Barker has staged "Grandma's Diary" himself. That was evidently a mistake. A modern director must be a play doctor, a casting agent, an expert on technical problems, etc. And we are of the opinion that most authors should not direct their own plays. They are too close to them. They are too fond of them to have the proper perspective. They hesitate to cut, to revamp their brain-children.

The Critics' Circle would do well to consider "Grandma's Diary" for a possible Worst-Play-of-the-Season award. Things must have been pretty dull in grandma's day, judging by her diary.

"Grandma's Diary"—continued

New York Post

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

The Most Dismal Event Of the Sad New Season

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

To all the other shows that have come to town this season I hereby present a deep and humble apology. However bad they may have seemed at the time, they stand out as flaming masterpieces in comparison to "Grandma's Diary," which somehow managed to get through three acts at the Henry Miller last night. I know that there were three acts because I was one of the few spectators foolhardy enough to sit through them.

I waited in vain. It was not that I expected the final round to be any better than those which had preceded it. Obviously, its author, Albert Wineman Barker, was guarding carefully against

any such possibility. I merely thought I might find out what the title was about. There were a few references to a grandmother and to a diary she had written, and there was even a portrait of the old lady, but what they had to do with the plot I never did discover.

Three Descriptions

"Grandma's Diary" can be described in several ways, all of them incriminating. It is the sort of play in which a character actually says: "All I want from you is silence, and very little of that." It is the sort of play in which the name of Orson Welles is hopefully used for the purpose of comedy. Finally, it is the sort of play in which mention of President Truman doesn't get a single laugh. Let's just call it the "Heads or Tails" of this season.

The great Percy Hammond once said of an unfortunate play that "the audience did not molest it with applause." He might have been anticipating "Grandma's Diary." Most of the bad plays that I, a long-suffering student of bad plays, can remember have

numbered among their spectators a few soft touches who have laughed heartily at least a few times. Not poor old "Grandma's Diary." It is truly the laughless comedy.

For Historians

There is no reason I can think of why even the most industrious future historians of the theatre should find a place among their annals for this unhappy little nonesuch, but, if they should, I have another description for them. It is the sort of play which thinks it is fresh and timely to satirize radio crooners. It is also about a soldier, who has just returned from Japan, and finds that he still loves his wife, a writer of soap operas. Sounds like material for tragedy to me.

If you wonder why a big, brdial fellow like this reviewer should pick on a poor little play like "Grandma's Diary" in such bullying fashion, I will tell you frankly. I am mad because I was such a dope as to sit through the thing. And this was supposed to be the theatre's greatest post-war season!

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

Opened by Mistake

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Out of respect for personal privacy, "Grandma's Diary" should never have been opened. For this "satirical comedy," put on at Henry Miller's last evening, is a silly prank that a third-rate summer theatre would feel embarrassed about doing in public. Albert Wineman Barker, author and director, is a long way from being master of the antic way, and none of the actors can make comedy out of his dim facetiousness. Raymond Sovey has designed an unbacked penthouse set, which is the only professional item in the production.

In view of the important news scheduled for other columns of the paper this morning, let's try to forget that grandma ever had a diary.

Herald Tribune

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Ouch!

THE American Theater Group is off to a sorry start with "Grandma's Diary." The Albert Wineman Barker comedy at Henry Miller's Theater is a windy and witless contemplation of a post-war romantic imbroglio. Since the acting and direction are on a par with the writing, every one is even

In this hapless enterprise. At times the author makes supposedly satirical thrusts at radio and soap operas. He should have been more discreet. Even the air waves rarely indulge in the tripe that is being pawned off as a play in the latest offering of the autumn.

It is difficult to say whether the plot itself or the characters are more obnoxious in "Grandma's Diary." The former has to do with an army captain returning home after a long sojourn in Japan with a new innamorata only to find that his wife has had herself a time with a crooner in his absence. The action, if you can call it that, con-

sists of abrupt entrances and exits and a strip-tease number by the leading lady which makes one long for the good old days of Minsky. The crooner is perhaps the most awful of the figures in the charade, as his voice changes from a tenor to a high falsetto in the stress of emotion. The others are not far behind him as people to be avoided like the pox, on-stage or off.

Gertrude Roman, who incidentally is managing director of the American Theater Group, plays the leading feminine role with stubborn coyness, frequently rushing backstage to caress a portrait

of grandma. Herbert Evers, Eileen Prince, George Neise and Leonard Elliott are among those who struggle fruitlessly with the ungainly script. At least all of the players in the piece are featured, if that gives them any satisfaction. Barker himself has staged his work against an ordinary Raymond Sovey setting, which makes it two strikes against him. At the end of the first act several principals announce that they are going to sleep on it. It was a notion shared by more than one member of the first-night audience.

Journal of the American

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

She Never Should've Put It in Writing!

By ROBERT GARLAND

What The Drama Critics' Circle needs is a woman drama critic. Women, it seems, know a bad play before they go to see it. Then they do not go to see it. Consequently, when a "Grandma's Diary" comes along, our female member could tip us off and we could stay away together.

Last night, at Henry Miller's Theatre, where the innately by Albert Wineman Barker had its initial metropolitan showing, no professional first-nighter was accompanied by his wife, his mother or his girl friend.

But, forlorn and dutiful on the aisles, we nine cold men of Broad-

way stayed to the end. And that was the only happy thing to be reported about the week's third premiere. It was a happy ending in every meaning of the term. Any other ending would have been as gladsome . . .

And to think that one female member of our Drama Critics' Circle could have tipped us off and spared us last night's ordeal by dialogue!

Formation an Error

This "Grandma's Diary" is the initial presentation of The American Theatre Group. And, I would

not be surprised, the last. Just how, where or why the collage was formed, I do not know. But I do know that its formation was an error, that its first production was a fiasco.

Let me tell you! The heroine, as they say, of "Grandma's Diary" is a member of The Federation of Radio Artists in good standing. If Martha Dean and Mary Margaret McBride will pardon me, she actually goes on the air. Soap is her racket. She may be what is wrong with radio!

She is, to an obvious extent, what is wrong with "Grandma's Diary." She, plus play, playwright and performers. Each, in any order you care to name them, is distressing to a professional first-nighter with affection and respect for the showstop and the show people therein . . .

Yet, in the footlights' glare on 43rd st., Peter and Carey and Boris love her simultaneously. And vulgarly. And as easily as can be!

Even He Bogs Down

To listen to, to look at, Linda

is studying to be a moron. And Peter, who is her husband, Carey, who is her neighbor, and Boris, who is her ghost-writer, fight and fidget for her favors. As projected by Herbert Evers, George Neise and Leonard Elliott, the boys are batty.

Mr. Elliott alone gives the impression of suspecting what he is up to. But even he bogs down beneath the acting-up of "Bird Brain," as Peter unashamedly calls his morose Linda. The others, as directed by the author, give the impression of disliking the play as much as he does.

One Gertrude Roman has, I suspect, cast herself as the would-be nit-wit heroine. According to programs at Henry Miller's, Miss Roman was forced to learn Yiddish and Hebrew in order to come to Broadway from her beloved Vienna. I am sorry she went to all that trouble . . .

In the face of last night's entry, we just have to have a woman drama critic. She would have stood in bed and worried us about "Grandma's Diary."

"Grandma's Diary"—continued

NEW YORK STAR

SEPTEMBER 24, 1948

A Radio Satire Below Radio Level

By John Lardner

Every now and then a theater critic says, "This is the worst play I ever saw," and then wishes he had kept his large mouth shut, for life is a rich and bountiful adventure which teems with twists and turns and sudden surprises. I will go further and state—just to give you a full nickel's worth of philosophy about life—that its resources are inexhaustible.

A couple of seasons ago I thought I would never sink my fangs into a more consummate turkey than *Heads or Tails*. Yet Wednesday night, at Henry Miller's auditorium on 43d St., there appeared an example of barnyard bird life called *Grandma's Diary* which is far and away—well, wait a minute, let's not get back on that limb. Who can say for sure that even *Grandma's Diary* is the last word in its field? To be on the safe side, I will

merely call it a good, solid try. The show that beats *Grandma* to the foot of the list will know it has been in a battle.

The new satirical comedy—I quote the billing with old-world courtesy—by Albert Wineman Barker is played by a company of seven actors and two oil paintings. The American Theatre Group, which produced it, is welcome to make use of a thought which occurred to me in the middle of the second act: reverse the distribution of duties, hang the actors on the walls (rear and left) and let the paintings have the stage, where they are as well equipped to transmit Mr. Barker's message as anyone else. One of them, called *Confusion*, is by Yar Yevos. The other, representing the shady character known in the play as Grandma, was loaned to the Group by James Montgomery

Flagg at an unstated rate of interest. Both of them figure, probably against their wishes, in the story.

There is no way of telling, apart from Mr. Flagg's portrait, who Grandma was, and no way whatever of telling what she put in her diary. A lady who writes a radio soap opera is apparently trying to borrow her plots from Grandma, but her ghost-writer won't let her. (A ghost-writer for a radio writer is a lost soul indeed, but then, the Yankees once had an understudy for their batboy.) From time to time, the lady goes up to the portrait and pats Grandma on the chest by way of apology. So much for Grandma.

The lady has a husband and a tenor lover. The husband has a girl friend who has a nurse's degree and an uncle. The ghost-writer has indignation. That takes care of all the

characters in *Grandma's Diary* except a colored retainer who has the damndest lines inflicted upon a member of his minority group since Octavius Roy Cohen was in his prime. Augustus Smith, who plays this part, has also played in *Our Lan'* and *On Whitman Avenue*, and is a writer and director in his own right, so that I imagine it is not without a certain inner struggle that he utters remarks like "Sorry, sir, but the resemblance don't ratify" and "Until I come back, please don't go herefrom."

A fair specimen of the vintage of the jokes which Mr. Barker allots to the rest of the cast is the following, spoken by Gertrude Rozan, who plays the soap-opera lady: "I want nothing from you but silence, and very little of that."

Miss Rozan, incidentally, is the managing director of the American Theatre Group. Her acting betrays an uneasy sense of guilt about this fact, as well it might. What could be more foolhardy than to launch a new enterprise with a satire on radio which is below the level of radio itself? For the record, the other performers are Herbert Evers, Eileen Prince, George Neise, Leonard Elliott, and Robert E. Griffin.

DAILY NEWS

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

'Grandma's Diary' Has, at Least, A First Act—and It Is a Beaut

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In the first act of "Grandma's Diary," which infiltrated the late Henry Miller's beautiful little playhouse on 43d St. last evening, there were details and occurrences as follows:

The setting was a penthouse underlooking the RCA Building. This is the first time a penthouse in any play ever underlooked anything.

The proprietress, or mistress, of the penthouse was a writer of soap opera radio programs and therefore could unquestionably afford the joint.

In the next-door penthouse was a radio singer whose voice was changing from baritone to falsetto. Every time he got excited he would squeak instead of talk and this worried him very much.

To the penthouse all the way from Japan came the radio writer's husband. With the husband

came a dame who had been traveling with him all the way from Japan. I think they had been on some kind of government business there.

Samples of Talk.

Also to the penthouse came a man needing a shave and eating a sandwich who seemed to be a radio director. This is called type casting.

At various times these people talked. Samples:

"There is nothing phonetic about Cary. He's a very real man."

"No woman forgets a husband very easily—unless he's living with her all the time."

"I think you have a splendid brain—for a woman."

Question—"You don't like me, do you?"

Answer—"Every time I look at you I could hiccup."

At the end of the act the radio writer's husband and her crooner crony had become acquainted and had begun talking. Said she, for a wow curtain line, "I'm glad you two have so much in COMMON."

At this point I had to leave on account of an allergy.

The program said there were two more acts, and that the whole play covered "seventeen hours of Spring in the penthouse of Linda Perdue

in New York City." Well, pee-poo to Perdue, and besides if I'd spent sixteen more hours there I'd have missed my deadline.

How to Pick Plays.

The actors were all awful and I am omitting their names, just as decent newspapers always omit the names of juvenile delinquents charged with such felonies as barfing, breaking and entering, entering and breaking and treason. This is nice of me, because nobody on the stage last evening was a juvenile.

The author is Albert Wineman Barker. The sponsor is the American Theatre Group, of which nobody heard until recently. President of the American Theatre Group is Eugene Levering Norton, age 68 last Aug. 15, who also is a director of the South American Gold and Platinum Co. and the Boston Sand and Gravel Co.

Yesterday's Times described Mr. Norton thus: "An avid theatregoer of long standing, he places great faith on a short-cut evolved by him in the selection of a script. He generally reads them at midnight and if he falls asleep that's better than the acid test to him."

If one can believe The Times, "Grandma's Diary" makes Mr. Norton the damndest famousst insomniac since Thomas Alva Edison, of the Consolidated Edison Co.

"A Story for Strangers"

The Sun

SEPTEMBER 22, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Feeble Fantasy at Royale.

Marc Connelly wrote a touching and elusive fantasy in "The Wisdom Tooth," but there is only a faint suggestion of that comedy's quality in "A Story for Strangers," in which he examines avarice and goodness in a small town in Michigan. The new piece was put on last evening at the Royale by Dwight Deere Wiman.



"A Story for Strangers" lacks the playwrighting magic that Connelly has brought to the New York stage on occasion for a quarter of a century. It has a few affecting moments and it offers several engaging performances, but it comes through as a singularly inept combination of realism and fantasy. The author's townsfolk are, in the majority, stock characters, and his play never gives the impression that he has ever been actually fascinated by a small town or got

to know its inhabitants particularly well.

In grappling with fantasy, mythology and philosophy, Connelly writes of the exaltation that comes upon the people of Huntsville, Mich., after a miracle has been performed in their midst—

namely, the miracle of a horse that talks. Most of the inhabitants were a scurvy lot before lightning strikes an old stable, giving youth and the power of speech to an old and dying animal.

Thieves and swindlers then become honest men. Littleless disappears; meanness vanishes. All of Huntsville is transformed into a center of good will and gallantry and human understanding. Until Irving, the horse, took himself up off the floor and began turning knaves and rogues into high-minded citizens, the only decent male in the community was Irving's youthful owner, who bought him for \$180.

There is an engaging performance from James Dobson, playing the boy who loves the old horse and lives with him in the stable. Joan Gray is an attractive heroine and there is a lively characterization from Joann Dolan, playing the young town trollop turned into a manicurist by the miracle at the barn.

Joseph Sweeney, as quizzical as ever, makes the town barber likeable and believable. Edward Nannary, another veteran trouper, in good as a paint salesman, just passing through, who is more than a little bewildered by the suddenly charitable ways of everybody in Huntsville. The horse whinnies are expertly done by Donald Bain. The horse is not seen by the audience, and it's a pity. I had developed an affection for Irving by the time

'A STORY FOR STRANGERS.'

A play by Marc Connelly; settings by Ralph Alsang; costumes by Millie Rutherford; staged by Marc Connelly; presented by Dwight Deere Wiman at the Royale Theater, Tuesday evening, September 21, 1948. The cast:

Newt Fender	Joseph Sweeney
Audrey	Joann Dolan
George Hubinder	Paul Huber
Vincent Gatliff	Joseph L. Graham
A. J. Kiesel	Frank Tweedell
Mr. Mercer	Edward Nannary
Sophia Whitting	Jane Hoffman
Hector Whitting	George Cotton
Norman Hunt	James Dobson
Bessie	Joan Gray
Policeman	Richard McMurray
	Victor Parber
	John McGovern
	Grace Valentine
	Tom Hoier
	Lauren Gilbert

SYNOPSIS: The action takes place in Huntsville, Mich., in 1924. Part I. Scene 1—A barber shop, Sept. 14. Scene 2—A porch, the previous July. Scene 3—An office, the same day. Scene 4—A stable, the same day. Part II. Scene 1—The barber shop, Sept. 14. Scene 2—The porch, Sept. 15. Scene 3—The stable, the same afternoon. Scene 4—The barber shop, Sept. 15.

the evening was done, and none at all for the play.

"A Story for Strangers," staged by Marc Connelly, must be put down as a dawdling and feeble fantasy.

Journal American

SEPTEMBER 22, 1948

Drama Distinguished By Expert Whinnying

By ROBERT GARLAND

If Irving, the invisible talking horse on 45th st. had half the good sense Marc Connelly says he has, he would have told Mr. Connelly not to write "A Story for Strangers" in the first place. Or, having written it for his own amusement, not to expose it publicly at the Royale.

Unlike Mary Chase's *Harvey*, the invisible talking rabbit three blocks to the north, Irving talks simply for the sake of talking. A direct descendant of Chiron and Pholus, the good centaurs, Marc Connelly's 28th Century offspring is a pooka for which the Greeks would have no good word.

Last night, I was glad that he stood in his stall—and whinnied!

For, although Irving talked out loud to Norman P. Hunt, his personalized Elwood P. Dowd, we in the auditorium could only hear him whinny. These horse noises, most expert of their kind, were supplied by Donald Bain.

Mr. Bain, I am given to understand, has whinnied for some of the best off-stage Dobbins. Had I my way, he would be starred in programs, and on billboards at the Royale. The Wico Company presents Donald Bain in "A Story for Strangers," for instance.

Bad Direction

As a matter of good reporting, the whinnies that moved Marc Connelly's Norman P. Hunt and the turntables that moved Ralph

Alsang's scenery were the most interesting events at last night's premiere. But neither was visible to the audience. Bad direction, I call it!

Even if Mr. Connelly's direction of his own play had been expert—which it undeniably was not—"A Story for Strangers" would have remained one of the most inexplicable experiences a metropolitan first night audience has so far known. Coming from a Marc Connelly, I mean!

With last night's "A Story for Strangers" going on, and looking back to "The Flowers of Virtue" which, in 1942 and the selfsame theatre, disappeared into the bad memory book of Broadway after four consecutive performances, I

was wondering if Mr. Connelly was much good when on his own.

His successful pieces, every one of them from "Dulcy," with George S. Kaufman, to "The Green Pastures," which was largely Roark Bradford, were the outcome of collaboration. In "Who's Who in America," under Marcus Cook Connelly, playwright, you can look and see.

'Parable' It Is

At any rate, Mr. Connelly called

"A Story for Strangers" a "parable." It could have been! For my dictionary defines a parable as a "discourse or saying conveying the intended meaning by a comparison or under the likeness of something comparable or analogous"—which makes no sense, either!

But it may give you some idea. It will give you small idea, however, of *The Boy who*, in Michigan's Huntsville of 1934, met *The Girl* who was promised to *Another*. So *The Boy* turned to *The Horse*, whose given name was *Irving*. *The Horse* spoke out. *The Boy* got *The Girl*. *Curtain!*

This, in support of Donald Bain's whinnying, was acted out straight-facedly under Marc Connelly's disinterested direction. But when, invisibly, Norman P. Hunt's talking horse was not talking and Ralph Alsang's moving scenery was not moving, the going was scarcely worth the sitting.

Mine is the firm belief that if a horse just has to talk, it should say something worth hearing; that if a playwright just has to write, he should write something worth seeing. Neither miracle took place last night when Marc Connelly's "A Story for Strangers" opened at the Royale.

"A Story for Strangers"—continued

New York Post

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

'A Story for Strangers' An Unhappy Parable

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

For a simple little fable about a modern miracle, Marc Connelly's "A Story for Strangers," which opened at the Royale last night, is remarkably complicated in its narrative. There is a talking horse, which whinnies a lot but is otherwise inaudible to the audience. There is considerable knowing talk about Greek mythology, the hero is compared to Ulysses, and a pagan diety apparently brings about the happy ending. Finally, there is a great deal of plot about a will and certain obscure swindling efforts, including one about a patent medicine. All of it added considerably to my growing discomfort over what Mr. Connelly describes as his "parable."

"A Story for Strangers" is the sort of play one wants almost passionately to like. It is so heartfelt, so filled with good will and a love for the simple human virtues that it seems virtually contemptible not to clasp it to your heart and cherish it. Inspired by the conviction that horses are better than men but that men are not basically as bad as they seem, it tells, with much fond detail, how the people of a small Michigan town, who are mostly swindlers and hypocrites, are transformed into saints when a horse speaks to them at the cost of its life, and it is most ardently on the side of the angels.

Caricatures

I am afraid that, for its weaknesses, Mr. Connelly must bear the blame as director as well as author. His small town people are caricatures rather than human beings, and that is in considerable part because of the way in which he has staged his parable. Somehow the goodness of his characters when they have reformed and their sly

hypocrisy when they are unregenerate are so equally exaggerated in manner that it is difficult to tell which mood is which or to believe in either of them.

The basis of such a play should be its simple, credible charm, and the unhappy truth is that the charm is rarely forthcoming in "A Story for Strangers." It is a mean trick to bring up an author's past success to make a point about one of his failures, but just the sort of engaging simplicity that brightened Mr. Connelly's "The Wisdom Tooth" has changed in his current comedy into a kind of false naïveté that is neither plausible nor attractive. Where his feeling for small town people was real and heart-warming, it now has an air of being academic and a little bloodless.

The Horse Talks

Technically he has not at all managed successfully the difficult matter of that talking horse. Originally, I believe, the voice of the animal was heard coming

from the depths of its stall. Now, while there is certainly an excess of whinnying, the big moment of climax, when the horse speaks to the villagers and turns them into saints, has to be taken on faith as the actors stand in stunted silence, and the scene simply doesn't work out. By that time, anyway, the play has been lost in the dreariness of its narrative, and it would have taken an authentic miracle to save it.

Most of the acting is rendered ineffectual by its caricature of the rapacious small-town types. As usual, there is an exception in the case of the unfailing Joseph Sweeney, the only actor I ever saw steal a scene from the great George M. Cohan. Mr. Sweeney opens the show in his role of the town barber, and he does it so engagingly that he leads you to hope for pleasant things about Mr. Connelly's parable that never eventuate. Then, too, the nicer characters are well enough interpreted by Joanne Dolan, James Dobson, Joan Gray and John McGovern. But the burlesque rogues help let down the play fatally.

NEW YORK STAR

SEPTEMBER 23, 1948

Small Miracle in Small Town

By Seymour Peck

About 10 o'clock Tuesday night, in "A Story for Strangers," an old plug horse named Irving suddenly began talking a blue streak. The characters in the play quite properly reacted as though this were something to marvel at, but since what Irving said struck me as just so much horse feathers, and since author Marc Connelly made us sit through two hours of this, tedious comedy before letting us in on his miracle, I found it hard to get worked up. By ten o'clock it was apparent to me, if not to Mr. Connelly, that it would take more than a miracle to pull "A Story for Strangers" through.

Even Mr. Connelly seemed half-

hearted about his miracle. His talking horse was kept well out of sight; we could not see him nor hear him speak. His words were merely passed along to us by characters who obviously got them straight from the horse's mouth. Irving contended, according to these characters, that the world is going to hell in a hammock and people ought to do something about it.

Though some excellent men have said this same thing far more pointedly and inspiringly than Mr. Connelly without altering the course of mankind, the people in "A Story for Strangers" were impressed to the point of complete reformation. The most crusty dow-

ager in town—the town is Huntsville, Michigan—got real chummy—in a patronizing way—with the village prostitute; the prostitute herself got a job as a manicurist; the skinflint banker grew generous towards the poor; the milk company began giving away milk to the needy; a man who had been using loaded dice gave back his winnings. Sweetness and light fairly drenched Huntsville.

Mr. Connelly has chosen to call this vaudeville skit stretched out to evening's length a "parable," a parable being, of course, a narrative embodying a moral. But as so often happens in this type of work, Mr. Connelly became more interested in his parable than in his people. His characters are almost altogether the stock small-town types—the slightly stupid mayor, the prostitute with the heart of gold, the greedy banker, the philosophical countererman in the village diner who reads Homer and quaintly mispronounces names like Fenelope, Scylla and Charybdis. When he is describing good, simple people, Mr. Connelly makes the mis-

take that frequently afflicts writers of small-town tales—the people are not so much simple as simple-minded. Mr. Connelly approaches them with a kindly, but ruinous condescension.

Since the people of the play are scarcely human beings, only a few of the actors, through their own creative talents, manage to communicate to the audience—notably Joanne Dolan, John McGovern, James Dobson, Joseph Sweeney and Jane Hoffman. It seems remarkable, too, that Mr. Connelly has set his play in the depression and yet has caught little of the real heartache and demoralization of those wretched years.

It is comforting to see Mr. Connelly on the side of human decency, but the next time he takes a stand in public, it might be better if his writing were stronger, his thinking sharper. Though I am not quick to agree with bankers, I went along ruefully with what the banker in "A Story for Strangers" said about Irving, the horse. It was his sober opinion that Irving might be worth as much as "eight dollars to a glue factory."

"A Story for Strangers"—continued

Daily Mirror

SEPTEMBER 22, 1948

'Story for Strangers' Opens at Royale

By ROBERT COLEMAN

We suspect that in penning "A Story for Strangers," which Dwight Deere Wiman brought to the Royale Theatre last evening, Marc Connelly, eminent professor of dramaturgy at Yale University, was subconsciously demonstrating for his pupils some of the things the budding playwright should avoid.

Connelly started out with an interesting story to tell—the story of how the larcenous citizenry of a Michigan town recaptured their souls through a miracle. They saw a broken-down horse transformed into a shining Pegasus, an equine philosopher. They repented of their sins, forgave their neighbors their debts

and helped a nice young couple to find happiness.

The play combines some of the more interesting elements of "A Man to Remember," "My Brother, Leslie Talked to the Horses" and "Father Malachy's Miracle." It contains the ingredients for a delightful and instructive fantasy, but author Connelly has not

blended them effectively.

Personally, we think the story should have been told in one scene instead of several. It should have been played straight at the audience without the interruptions of a narrator right out of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." Its characters should have been people, not types. Its dialogue should have sparkled with wit and wisdom instead of relying upon leaden platitudes.

The script is in two acts. Too much of the first canto is devoted to exposition. Not until the second and concluding part does the dramatist come to grips with the motivating miracle. And even then he is unable to conjure up the fantastic mood, the imaginative sense of unreality, the humanity, the warmth demanded by the subject.

The author's direction also leaves much to be desired. He has taken a number of excellent actors and actresses, typed them in stocky fashion and refused to let them become recognizable

folk. Had they emerged as universal types, that would have been commendable indeed; amazing, in fact, in this era when dramatists are prone to deal with particularized amoeba.

Joseph Sweeney and John McGovern, two of our best character actors, struggled valiantly to overcome the handicaps of stilted writing and staging. Joanne Dolan also merits a salute for distinguished service under fire. And citations should go to Paul Huber, Frank Tweddell, Joseph L. Graham, Edward Mannary, Jane Hoffman, Grace Valentine, Tom Hoier, Lauren Gilbert, Joan Gray and James Dobson for stalwart effort.

We can understand why Dwight Wyman thought "A Story for Strangers" worth producing. We can only regret that Connelly was not successful in his attempt to remind a materialistic civilization that culture and faith, as well as science, have their values in a neurotic, shell-shocked world.

DAILY NEWS

SEPTEMBER 22, 1948

'A Story for Strangers' Misses

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "A Story for Strangers," which was submitted at the Royale last evening, Marc Connelly shows the greatest good will toward humanity, spinning a gentle tale about a talking horse which, or who, reforms a whole town. I'd be happier tonight if I could state that the play's strength is as the strength of ten because Mr. Connelly's heart is pure. But I just can't do it.

"A Story for Strangers" does have engaging performances by Joanne Dolan, James Dobson and Joan Gray, and it does have refreshing touches of Mr. Connelly's elfish humor; it also is quite dreary. It plays like any combined month's sequences of "Little Orphan Annie" and "L'il Abner."

With a talking horse it is, obviously, a fantasy, and I am an addict of this form of playmaking. I'll see "Outward Bound," "On

Borrowed Time" and such any time anybody wants to revive them, and after all these years can reassure Maude Adams that there IS a Tinker Bell. But tonight I just don't believe there was an old nag named Irving in the stall of the dairy stable at Huntville, Mich., in the depression year of 1934.

Stock Characters.

"A Story for Strangers" is disarmingly called a parable—disarmingly, because this should make it all right for all the characters to be stock. The banker is greedy, the mayor is a weakling, the bar-

ber is a bookmaker, the manicurist is the village Hatrack, the chief of police is a crook and The Girl's mother thinks only of marrying her daughter to somebody with money.

On the other, or good hand, The Girl is sweet and virginal, though a widow, and she wants to marry The Boy, who is as penniless as they come but very noble. The little manicurist turns out to be a tramp with a heart of gold, and there is a waiter named St. Elmo Ottley who, though unlettered, is an expert on mythology.

St. Elmo is on hand to lecture the audience a bit about the Greek and Roman powers, so that it won't be surprising when The Boy happens to address the right Roman deity and brings about a miraculous cure of his dying old nag. Moreover, Irving begins to confide

in The Boy, telling him that he's Ulysses and The Girl is his Penelope—and that horses are very sorry for human beings for being so foolish when they are really decent at heart.

In Flashback Style.

Finally, to save The Boy from serious trouble, Irving breaks the talking-horse rule, which is that if one confides in more than one human being, one drops dead. Irving tells all the baddies in town that there still is hope for them, and drops dead sure enough.

This miracle reforms the town and the story is told in flashbacks, beginning with a scene in which the banker calls off loans, a crooked gambler returns money and the manicurist is pure. The flashbacks are cumbersome and so are the scene changes. Only occasionally does the author's real genius for drollery emerge, as

when Irving (whom the audience never hears, by the way) refuses to run in a race for money because he believes it is immoral, win or lose.

It's a big company in the play, and reliable. In addition to those mentioned, I'd like to toss a valentine to Grace Valentine for her playing of the nasty old mother.

"A Story for Strangers"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

SEPTEMBER 22, 1943

— By HOWARD BARNES —

A Horse on Marc

THE miracle of a talking horse engages Marc Connelly's loquacious attention in "A Story for Strangers." The eminent author and academician discusses small-town skulduggery, mythology, faith, hope and charity in his new parable at the Royale Theater. The rub is that most of his observations are trivial on any account and the remainder of them are downright stuttering. To the great credit of this Dwight Deere Wiman production, the off-stage

horse merely whinnies. If the animal had been allowed to join vocal forces with the other characters in "A Story for Strangers" the piece might have become a marathon philosophical bull session.

There is no questioning Connelly's sincerity in trying to gauge the effects of a minor miracle on assorted residents of Huntville, Mich., in the depression year of 1934. The play is, in a strict sense, a parable, and it occasionally has the disarming quality of illuminating old adages. Under his own direction the touch is light, but it had to be with the featherweight material at hand. With the reliable Joseph Sweeney playing a barber and John McGovern giving a good account of himself

as a counterman who believes in even prosaic miracles, such as getting a job when he needed one, there are flashes of theatrical excitement at the Royale. They are as fugitive as heat lightning.

The people of the piece are, if anything, too recognizable. With occasional flash-backs, "A Story for Strangers" offers a wicked banker, a lawyer, a self-appointed minister and a mother in all the dimensions of a second-rate movie. Against them it pits a pretty daughter, a good-hearted farm boy, the town lart and the horse. It is giving away no secret to tell you that the right side wins. The conversion of the phillistines is still a crashing bore. There is too little leaven of humor in the work to make it a somewhat gay stage lec-

ture. There is too little dynamic drama to give emotional propulsion to the plot.

Aside from Sweeney and McGovern, the players rarely stand out with genuine clarity. Joann Dolan is pretty enough as the reformed strumpet who joins with Sweeney in relating the episodes of the miracle to an incredulous drummer. Edward Nannary is properly pop-eyed in the last-named role and Frank Tweddell, Paul Huber, Grace Valentine and Lauren Gilbert add heavy-handed caricatures to the production. Connelly may be quite right in thinking that a talking horse might make evil people right and decent, but he hasn't proved his point in "A Story for Strangers." The latest arrival on Broadway is no help to a hobbled season.

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 22, 1943

Marc Connelly's Parable, 'A Story for Strangers,' Chronicles a Miracle in an American Town

By BROOKS ATKINSON

According to the program, Marc Connelly's "A Story for Strangers," which opened at the Royale last evening, is a parable. That is one explanation for the confusing garrulity of Mr. Connelly's modern miracle-play. But unfortunately it is no excuse for a rambling excursion into the world of make-believe by the man who dramatized "The Green Pastures" eighteen years ago and can still get no higher than heaven. Under Mr. Connelly's personal direction the new play receives a colorless performance to which an aggrieved playwright might legitimately ob-

ject.

Uncle Marc is an amiable gentleman who likes to tell stories. Projecting himself into the characters of his drama, he has written an after-dinner piece in which all the characters seem to be telling mysterious stories about other people, which is a tiresome and complicated device. Fortunately, one of the characters (totally unseen, by the way) is a talking horse; and in the last act the audience gets a little information straight from the horse's mouth. After a fairly soporific evening, the climactic information sounds inconsequential. By this time, Uncle Marc has got his children in

the mood for bed.

Huntville, Mich., is a small town that has been reformed by a miracle and is overflowing with brotherly love. In the first scene, set in a barbershop, the barber and manicurist try to tell a traveling salesman how it all came about. At this point in the drama, Mr. Connelly starts a series of explanations and flash-backs that become curiously and curiously seem to have the effect of extending his dramatic exposition clear on into the conclusion. "A Story for Strangers" is nine-tenths prologue.

Only de Lawd from "The Green Pastures" could rear back and pass a miracle mighty enough to pull "A Story for Strangers" together after so much retroactive writing. The talking-horse who weeps for humanity is no more than Uncle Marc's last whimsical anecdote before bedtime.

No one can accuse Mr. Connelly of overdirecting his parable. He has cast it with his usual relish of folksy good-humor and has performed the laudable service of getting Joseph Sweeney back on the

stage. Cast as a barber, Mr. Sweeney makes with the razor, which is perhaps not his forte, but he does talk with a kind of lean and fanatical frenzy, which is. In the part of a reformed strumpet, now operating as a manicurist, Joann Dolan is also vibrant in a related Celtic vein.

James Dobson plays a good-hearted simpleton with considerable invention and skill. Although Joan Gray is not yet a very resourceful actress, she has a fine quality of personal sincerity in the opposite part of a small-town girl who acts on faith at the end. There are a number of interesting character actors in Mr. Connelly's spiritual charade. John McGovern is the best of them.

Faced with the necessity of designing scenery that has to be miraculously mobile, Ralph Alswang has come up with a redolent barbershop and a savory stable as well as with other local corners, all of which are interesting. In that respect he has the edge on Mr. Connelly. "A Story for Strangers" is not.

New York World-Telegram

SEPTEMBER 22, 1943

'Story for Strangers' Is a Strange Story

By WILLIAM HAWKINS

"A Story for Strangers" is the first mystery play of the season. It is labeled a parable in the program, but whatever you choose to call it, it remains unsolved.

In it a town full of the most unpleasant people on record is changed overnight into a set of the noblest of characters because a horse talks to them. Just why this occurs is not the least bit

clear, because no one in the audience can hear the horse. He is quoted, however, as making some pretentious remarks about everybody being Ulysses when he starts out in life.

The play is told in an unwieldy series of flashbacks. A traveling salesman stops for a shave in a Michigan town, and tries to discover the reason for a wild and

incoherent celebration. Seven more scenes are devoted to a most exasperating narration which presumes to explain all the cheering.

The central story is about one Bessie who loves a penniless young man named Norman. Bessie's avaricious mother has married her off to one rich man who died, and is lying in wait for another chance, now that she knows Bessie's inheritance is not as fat as she had hoped.

Norman buys an ancient horse for \$1.80, and gets a job delivering milk. He is a kindly bumpkin who never collects bills and believes rabidly in universal good will.

There are various involvements of the town's leading citizens, a venomous lot. There is an arbitrary division of characters based on the premise that anyone who makes a living is morally curdled.

When Norman's horse catches pneumonia, the young owner makes a wish that the goddess of stables might help out. The horse is struck by lightning, regains his

youth and acquires the ability to talk, but only to Norman, on penalty of death.

To save his owner from a tight situation, the horse makes his aforementioned speech about Ulysses and drops dead. The townspeople are so affected that they turn into saints.

About Horse Sense

The moral of this seems to be that a horse has more sense than a man. Whether you quarrel with this thesis or not, "A Story for Strangers" is a dreary, discursive argument in its favor.

The cast for the most part is too good for comfort, and goes far toward explaining the trend of the population to move from small towns to large cities. The showier parts fall to Grace Valentine, Joann Dolan and James Dobson, who do right by them.

This is the talkiest play that has been around in a blue moon.

"Magdalena"

New York Post

SEPTEMBER 21, 1948

Score Is Best Feature Of New Musical Drama

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

"Magdalena," a lavish and elaborately colorful musical drama from California, had the most stylish opening of the fall semester at the Ziegfeld Theatre last night, but it is my sullen conviction that the new season still hasn't managed to get properly started. The score by Brazil's eminent Villa-Lobos is unquestionably impressive, and a couple of the dance numbers have an agreeable, pseudo-savage frenzy about them, but unhappily there is a book, and dismal is my word for it. It is an ostentatious libretto, too, and it makes what might have been an arresting evening an oppressive one.

Having a taste for shamelessly tuneful popular music, I must confess, in my lowbrow way, that I would have been happier if there had been a few rousing melodies in the Villa-Lobos score. Nevertheless its merits are obvious, even to me. It has power and originality and a certain

striking austerity. It is never cheap nor reminiscent, and it makes no pretence at being heavily exotic. In one number, in which there is the effect of a broken pianola interrupting a sad native song, it reaches a quality of imagination and humor that is delightful. Villa-Lobos is clearly the star of "Magdalena."

The Plot

In the light of such musical merits, it might seem ungenerous to lay so much emphasis on the weakness of the accompanying narrative. The trouble is, as I have suggested, that the libretto by Frederick Hazlitt Brennan, the novelist, and Homer Curran, the show's producer, is not only dull but in the way. It looms menacingly over the music and the dancing, ponderous, fatiguing and steadily laborious. As heavy-footed in its comedy as in its drama, it spreads a pall of tediousness over the proceedings, making for gloom and restlessness.

As a slight added handicap, the book also struck me as a trifle distasteful. I am not referring to a rather dubious episode in which a fat general with high blood pressure, who serves as both comic and villain, died in convulsions amid much detail, after his

jealous comic mistress had fed him a rich meal and sings as he writhes over the table. My quarrel with the plot is even more serious. Its authors have seen fit to combine their 1912 sex comedy, about the gustatory general and his culinary mistress, with a mystic tale of religious faith among the Indians of the Magdalena River valley, and the amalgamation seemed to me a questionable one.

It is a slightly complicated plot, and I will bother you with but a few details of it here. It seems that all the Indians have been converted to Christianity by the holy Padre Josef, save a few recalcitrants, led by the bold and dashing Pedro, who loves his bus and sings to it. He is pretty scornful of the girl Maria for her attempts to be meek and pious, and finally he steals the statue of the Blessed Virgin from the chapel courtyard. Then he and his bus fall over the mountain side, and when he discovers that the Madonna has spared his beloved "gasolina" from serious harm, he, too, is converted by the miracle.

I could not help finding the episode considerably less than edifying, particularly in juxtaposition to the laborious sex farce and that curious death scene.

"MAGDALENA"

MAGDALENA, "a musical adventure" in two acts and nine scenes, by Frederick Hazlitt Brennan and Homer Curran. Music by Heitor Villa-Lobos. Pattern and lyrics by Robert Wright and George Furth. Presented by Mr. Curran and produced by Edwin Lester; starred by John Haas; settings and lighting by Howard Bay; costumes by Irene Sharaff; choreography by Jack Cole; musical direction by Arthur Kay; stage direction by Robert Keller. At the Ziegfeld Theatre.

Padre Josef	Gerhard Forster
Manuel	Peter Fiala
Salva	Malva Wilson
Ramon	Henry Ross
Maria	Dorothy Sarnoff
Padre	John Raitt
Major	Ferdinand Hill
Doctor Lopez	Carl Miller
General Carabana	Hugh Haas
Chantress	Betty Hull
Cigarette Girl	Christina Hoffman
Exotic	John Schilling
Indians	Lorraine Miller
Teresa	Ira Petina
The Old One	Guss Curtin
Chief	Patricia Kirk
Juan	Leonard Morganthal
Chantress	Betty Hull
Major Ross	Ray Raymond
Balladeer	Marie Green
	Max Martin

There is no denying that the production has color and vitality, that the music deserves admiration if not affection, and that the performers are satisfactory if not exciting. Dorothy Sarnoff as the pious heroine sings excellent-

ly and Ira Petina as the general's Parisian mistress has a certain low comedy sense. But, for me, "Magdalena" ended in boredom.

DAILY NEWS

SEPTEMBER 21, 1948

'Magdalena' a Bold, Fascinating And Dazzling Musical Adventure

By JOHN CHAPMAN

This and the following paragraphs are a salute to California—the California of Edwin Lester and Homer Curran, of Freddie Brennan and the Western Costume Company, of Hugo Haas and Bud Westmore and the talented and handsome big company who have made "Magdalena" a bold and stunning departure in the musical theatre.

I'll be saluting New York, too—the New York of Howard Bay and the Ziegfeld Theatre and Local 802 and Arthur Kay and John Raitt and many others. The Brazil of Heitor Villa-Lobos is a land of strange enchantments. But California gets the Oscar for making a dazzling venture in creative theatre and sending it to us here—to us who have thought for so many years that there isn't any show business west of Ninth Ave.

"Magdalena" was presented last evening at the Ziegfeld. It is a flaming, opulent, disturbing and

imaginative work which does not fit into any of the standard patterns. The producer, Mr. Curran, calls it a musical adventure in the program, and that is just what it is.

It Takes Listening.

An adventure is not to be taken lightly, and an adventure involves risk. Some of "Magdalena" is overly solemn, and, unlike a musical comedy which has to get moving right off the bat, it takes its time getting under way. Its music, by Villa-Lobos, is busy, immensely intricate and strangely, fascinatingly orchestrated. It is not a musical like "Annie Get Your Gun," where you can take your seat, relax and say, "Okay, Annie—give."

You'll have to do a lot of giving to Magdalena—a great deal of listening; but you will be rewarded.

Except for one scene in Paris, the locale of Frederick Hazlitt Brennan's and Homer Curran's book is a Moso village on the Magdalena River in Colombia. Here a priest has gained simple converts, including a girl who is the chief of the Mosos who work in an emerald mine. Here comes a fat old playboy, General Carabana, the mine owner, whose pleasant dalliances in Paris have been interrupted by a strike of the workers which must be settled. With the General comes his mistress, whom he loves because she is a Cordon Bleu cook.

This Brazil of scene designer Howard Bay, costume Irene Sharaff and dance director Jack Cole is turbulent and ablaze with color—and so is the Brazil of its own composer, Villa-Lobos. Last evening I listened as best I could,

but I have a feeling that I missed more than I caught—that I'll have to return more than once to get all there must be in the score.

A Splendid Company.

The company is splendid right down to the smallest child singer. I knew what to expect of John Raitt, Dorothy Sarnoff and Ira Petina, for I had seen them work before. They had to be good and they are. But I was particularly taken by the performance of Mr. Haas; who, they tell me, is known to filmgoers, for his portrayal of the food-loving, lecherous and humorous General. This General is very much like the one in Ludwig Bemelmans' fine satirical novel, "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep."

Miss Petina emerges as a wonderful lowdown comedienne with a fine voice in the role of the General's mistress. Miss Sarnoff has spirit and another fine voice as the chief of her villagers. Mr. Raitt is great as a big, lusty bus driver.

There are twenty-nine or thirty musical and dance numbers, not counting a number of between-scenes sketches. Some of them are recognizable dance forms and will easily be assimilated by the radio—and the rest of them are just plain fascinating.

They've got an awful lot of talent in Brazil—not to mention California.

"Magdalena"—continued

The New York Times

SEPTEMBER 21, 1948

Heitor Villa-Lobos, Brazilian Composer, Has Written the Musical Score for 'Magdalena'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Heitor Villa-Lobos, the Brazilian composer, has written the score for "Magdalena," which was put on at the Ziegfeld last evening. Although he has been certified as authentic by qualified musicologists, it is impossible to have much of an idea about the score for a very unfortunate reason. "Magdalena" is one of the most overpoweringly dull musical dramas of all time. Watching the slow process of the plot and production is like being hit over the head with a sledge hammer repeatedly all

evening. It hurts.

Even had musical plays do not need to be so profoundly dull as this one. Rummaging around among the old hats in the garret, the entrepreneurs of "Magdalena" have set the art of music drama back several generations, as though nothing had been accomplished since "The Prince of Pilsen." Since they are serious about this romantic "musical adventure," it is plain that their taste is definitely in favor of the old stencils of operetta and that they are uninterested in the modern achievements of "Brigadoon," "Finian's Rainbow," the Kurt Weill "Street Scene,"

to say nothing of "Oklahoma!"

As a matter of fact, there is no intelligent reason why a serious composer need be introduced as though musical drama were written exclusively for humorless audiences that have disliked everything since "The Student Prince." Villa-Lobos has written a South American score with motives presumably taken from the native music of Magdalena. River people. It includes a fine meditative poem about a jungle river and several rousingly beautiful religious songs, written for several voices and chorus. It also includes a pleasant Spanish waltz and an amusingly orchestrated burlesque of a broken-down mechanical piano. Disentangled from the appalling libretto and lyrics of "Magdalena," the score might be stimulating, especially since the orchestrations are unacknowledged and an accomplished singing actress, like Irma

Petina, can give her numbers brilliance and eloquence.

But the men of letters and ideas who acknowledge authorship of "Magdalena" have insisted on hitching a contemporary Brazilian score to a threadbare show-shop formula with some egregious Continental flourishes. Not only is the form of the libretto with stock characters archaic, but the story is unintelligible. The production is elaborately old-fashioned and the direction is ponderous.

"Magdalena" is a production of the Los Angeles Civic Opera Association. It is reported to have been successful on the West Coast during the summer. If it honestly represents the taste of West Coast audiences, there is apparently a time-lag between East and West much more epochal than had been supposed. "Magdalena" is probably the sort of academic chore that put the Manacora opera house out of business.

Daily Mirror

SEPTEMBER 21, 1948

'Magdalena,' Has Rich, Lush Music

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Magdalena," "a musical adventure," which Homer Curran brought to the Ziegfeld Theatre last evening, is one of the costliest productions on record. It is reported to have cost its sponsor and his associates some \$360,000, which is impressive even during an inflationary period.

"Magdalena" is really a colorful opera, with score by the amazing Brazilian, Heitor Villa-Lobos. The South American composer pours forth rich, lush music with the irresistible surge of the Amazon, and often it is just as undisciplined.

Robert Wright and George Forrest have teamed to shape the Villa-Lobos music and equip it with lyrics. Frederick Hazlitt Brennan and Homer Curran have backed it with a libretto, which is frequently dull and nothing

better than serviceable.

The libretto has to do with the efforts of the woman ruler of a South American Indian tribe to obtain justice for her people from a spendthrift and dissipated general, who has stolen the emerald mines in which they labor.

Needless to say, there is a happy ending, carrying with it a message of faith and good will.

As "Magdalena" was unfolded in the Ziegfeld last evening, we could not help comparing it with

"The Pearl Fishers," and it is definitely inferior to the latter. "Magdalena" is overpowering at its choral best, but it lacks the beauty and the clarity of "The Pearl Fishers" in its arias.

It is going to be difficult for the average playgoer, schooled in traditional musical comedy and light opera, to cope with "Magdalena's" musical intricacies. He or she is, in our opinion, going to be frustrated in attempting to isolate hummable passages. The juke-box impresarios, we fear, also are going to be similarly troubled. And these gentry, think what you will of them, are invaluable aids at the box-office.

Dominating "Magdalena" is Irma Petina, a magnetic mezzo-soprano; cast as a Parisian demi-mondaine with the genius of a Brillat-Savarin or an Escoffier. Miss Petina is fascinating.

John Raitz, who has a true, powerful voice, is excellent as the owner of a vintage motor-bus and a befuddled mind. Those who heard him in "Oklahoma" and "Carousel" are going to be astounded by the improvement in his vocal chords and stage pres-

ence. Dorothy Sarnoff is brilliant in her fortissimo passages, but leaves something to be desired in the lower and middle registers. She has a fine voice, but appears to have overworked it recently.

Hugo Haas, a comedian who reminds us more than a little of Herman Bing, works wonders with some not very funny material. Citations are also due Jules Dassin for his direction, Howard Ray for the settings, Irene Sharaff for the costumes, Jack Cole for the choreography, Arthur Kay for his batonning and Robert Zeller for the choral direction.

The production was supervised by Edwin Lester, a gentleman of impeccable taste.

We doubt that "Magdalena," for all its high purpose and virtues, can overcome the handicaps of a towering production cost, staggering weekly expense and a \$6 top. When it has exhausted the musical cognoscenti, it is likely to find it difficult to attract playgoers who like their comedy hilarious, their hoofing hot and their songs obviously Hit Parade-ish.

NEW YORK STAR

SEPTEMBER 21, 1948

A Manhattan Musical In Lush Latin Garb

By JOHN LARSEN

If you can manage, with or without surgery, to take your eyes and ears to the Ziegfeld Theater and leave your cerebrum at home on

the hat-rack, it's conceivable that you will enjoy *Magdalena*, a lush operetta or "musical adventure" which opened Monday night in a blaze of lights, color, melody and dramatic torpor.

The assets of *Magdalena* are a carload of gorgeous costumes and the music of Heitor Villa-Lobos, who is a better composer than you or I or Hoagy Carmichael. Under the heading of asset 2, there are several talented singers who can spread the news loudly and on key. Under the heading of humor, there is, somewhere near the beginning of the second act, a joke. I made a note of the latter the moment it occurred, but it now appears that in the Stygian gloom of row H, I transcribed the thing on a neighbor's cuff instead of my own, and the point of it is probably languishing in a hand laundry as

we go to press. I can only say of this lonely jest that if you heard it, you'd recognize it.

Villa-Lobos, as every music-lover knows, is Brazilian. Some of his songs and dances for *Magdalena* have a familiar Vienna-Naples light opera ring, but others, based on the native music of his own continent, and played by an orchestra which includes such equipment as the reco-reco, the pío, and the chucalho de metal, are authentically and pleasantly South American. In any style, Villa-Lobos is a generous man with pretty notes. He

pours them over you like cream. The number I liked best is a dance called *The Broken Pianolita*. A pianolita, according to the evidence at the Ziegfeld, is a spinet which grows wild in the jungle.

We have now exhausted the genuine South American features of *Magdalena*. The show purports to be South American through and through. Its players speak their lines in a subtle and profound form of "foreign" English which you have doubtless run across before and which consists largely in saying "I do not care" instead of "I don't care." However, they won't fool you. They are mostly local folks. As for the story, though it

is alleged to take place in the republic of Colombia, it follows the pure and classic line of musical comedy as practiced in Culver City, Calif., and western Manhattan—except, as I said before, that it omits comedy.

It may be that the book, written by Frederick Hazlitt Brennan and Homer Curran, contains an idea faintly above the average in musical shows. The Muzo Indians, working an emerald mine on the Magdalena River belonging to a certain Gen. Carabana, are unhappy about the general's labor policies. Since their lady chieftain (a soprano) has lately been over-

powered by Christianity, they are of two minds on how to improve conditions. The Christian faction would like to approach the general with love and charity, the pagan or left-wing element wants a good, rough strike.

Unfortunately, this fairly fresh theme is written and played *au gratin*, in the manner of *Getting Gertie's Carter*. The strife between Christian and pagan is a good deal like a duel with dornicks between the Y.M.C.A. and the Hudson Dusters. The Indians are phony, the general is phony, and, judging through an ordinary pair of reading glasses, the emeralds are phony.

There is also a quantity of artificial victuals in the plot, owing to the fact that Gen. Carabana's mistress from Paris is a short-order cook on the side. The part of this amorous skillet-tosser is played by Irra Petina, a lady who sings very well and looks as though she might be funny, with encouragement.

John Raitt, formerly the baritone ace of *Carousel*, and Dorothy Sarnoff are strongly tuneful in the leading roles of the piece. *Magdalena* is said to have edified San Francisco and Los Angeles before coming here, and will probably provide a satisfactory bath for the eyes and ears wherever it plays. As for laughs—well, maybe Villa-Lobos doesn't need 'em.

The Sun

SEPTEMBER 21, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE

Bountiful and Heavy-footed.

The West Coast drama country that once yielded "The Bird of Paradise" and "Peg o' My Heart" and that also supplied the popular "Song of Norway," now gives us

"Magdalena," a pageant of the Colombia jungle areas. The new production, which must have cost several fortunes, was presented last night at the Ziegfeld by Homer Curran and Edwin Lester.



They've spent money unsparingly on the big, lush "Magdalena." There are good people in the company, which includes John Raitt and Irra Petina. The Brazilian composer, Heitor Villa-Lobos, has contributed an impressive score, and it is splendidly sung. Jack Cole's choreography includes some barbaric dances, and Howard Bay's scenery brings the tangled beauty of the Colombian wilds to the Ziegfeld stage.

So much for the assets. There is now the matter of the Frederick Hazlitt Brennan-Homer Curran libretto, which puts more into an evening than Thompson Buchanan ever wrote into a massive melodrama called "Life." This new "Magdalena" is burdened with an awkward and ponderous book, all about insurrection and strife in the land of the emerald mines and the Muzo Indians. It has also to do with religion and tells of the eventual conversion to Christianity of the swaggering and unholy Pedro, the bus driver, spiritedly played by John Raitt and admirably sung by him in his fine baritone.

Irra Petina gets a lot of life into her singing and playing as Teresa, the French adventuress, who gets her emerald necklace after poisoning the mine-owning general. Dorothy Sarnoff is excellent as the fiery and deeply religious native girl, Maria, who is revolted by Pedro's theft of

the Madonna from her shrine. Hugo Haas is unctuous and expansive as the bulky General Carabana.

"Magdalena" is part opera, part operetta, part musical comedy, part folk play with music. The management, seemingly unable to make up its mind, calls it "a musical adventure" on the playbill. The locale for eight of the nine scenes is the Magdalena river country; the other scene reveals the Little Black Mouse Cafe in Paris. One peek at that and we were taken right back to the jungle. As I remember "The Merry Widow," Maxim's was a bit sayer than the Little Black Mouse.

For all of its music and its values as a spectacle, "Magdalena" remains quite a bore. It is cumbersome and pretentious. A bountiful musical play but heavy-footed.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

SEPTEMBER 21, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Colombia—No Gem

ALTHOUGH it is called "a musical adventure," with a "pattern" as well as book and lyrics, "Magdalena" is nothing more nor less than a conventional light opera with a South American setting. At the Ziegfeld Theater, where it has arrived after showings in Los Angeles and San Francisco, it is a melodious and gaudy pageant. The Brazilian composer, Heitor Villa-Lobos, has written a bountiful and varied score for the show which is interpreted with vocal enthusiasm by Irra Petina, John Raitt, Dorothy Sarnoff and Hugo Haas. Sharaff has clothed numbers spectacularly against Howard Bay's rococo-primitive settings and Jack Cole has devised undulant dance routines to punctuate the arias and duets. It is a zealous and painstaking production, but one that has a tendency to be top-heavy.

The title refers to a river in Colombia, where Indian emerald miners rise against their presiding general and accept Christianity. The theme has given Villa-Lobos full scope for his particular method of composing. He has taken native songs and rituals and translated them to a contemporary idiom. On the whole he has been rather successful in "Magdalena," tempering monotonous jungle rhythms with singing phrases. "My Bus and I," "The Emerald," the Chivor dance or "Freedom!" are the sort of songs you might expect to find in an operetta about a mythical European kingdom as well as Colombia. The "pattern,"

lyrics and book by Robert Wright, George Forrest, Frederick Hazlitt Brennan and Homer Curran do not aid much in keeping the proceedings buoyant.

As a matter of fact, the principals have a hard time with the rambling plot. For a brief interlude the action shifts from the jungle to a Paris bistro in 1912, where the general is demonstrating his gustatory prowess. Throughout "Magdalena" a great deal of fake food is dragged on and off stage, even to the point of inspiring a song called "Piece de Resistance." The offering is on surer ground when it is concerned with the Muzos and the Chivors; their tribal ceremonials and their tentative acceptance of Christianity. There are striking dancing and choral ensembles and some effective interludes as Miss Sarnoff, a convert, tries to win over Raitt to her faith. They both sing with all the stops out and succeed in building up a somewhat strenuous romance.

Miss Pettina is an arch and accomplished comedian as well as an engaging singer. She almost makes the culinary passages in "Magdalena" tasty, as she slings seasoning around while hitting a high note. Haas has the thankless assignment of the gourmet dictator and plays and sings it as straight as any role has ever been performed in a musical adventure. Marie Groscup and Matt Mattox are the chief dancers in the "Vals de Espana" number. They are agile and stylish. Melva Niles, Henry Reese and Gene Curtissinger are some of the others who labor to sustain the sprawling continuity of the work. "Magdalena" is a big, tuneful operetta extravaganza in which a South American jungle background does little to relieve a general tedium.